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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 002162

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SUBJECT: (C) GENERAL AOUN ON LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS

REF: 3/21/05 EMAIL DIBBLE-WOLFF AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex Wolff, reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary and comment: At the Department's recommendation (reftel), DCM met with former Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Aoun at the latter's request March 29. Throughout the hour-long discussion, Aoun stressed his status as the most long-standing opponent of Syria's occupation of Lebanon, and made a distinction between himself and other opposition figures unwilling to voice public support for UNSCR 1559 and willing to work with the Syrians prior to Hariri's assassination. Aoun confirmed his intention to return to Lebanon soon without offering a date, said he expected that Syria's regime would fall post-Lebanon withdrawal, and suggested that political negotiations with Hizballah might be the best way to move towards eventual disarmament and dismantling of the organization. On the latter point, Aoun suggested that USG indication of flexibility on court cases against Hizballah's top leadership could help facilitate Hizballah's disarmament and dismantling. DCM responded by reiterating that USG policy on Hizballah's status as a terrorist organization remained unchanged. Aoun also suggested that Lebanon's spring parliamentary elections might be best delayed until August, and asserted that if the elections were held on time, Hizballah would win big. Aoun was relaxed and confident, but relatively soft-spoken throughout the discussion; he appeared not to be seeking USG support so much as a captive audience. End summary and comment.

2. (C) DCM opened the discussion by reiterating the need for full implementation of UNSCR 1559, a full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon before elections, free and fair elections, and a credible international investigation into former PM Hariri's assassination. DCM stressed that he was meeting with Aoun privately at the latter's request and that he had no message to convey from the USG, other than the need for the Lebanese opposition to remain united and determined in its pursuit of Lebanon's full independence and sovereignty. Aoun responded by highlighting his Congressional testimony prior to adoption of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Restoration of Sovereignty Act, which he credited with leading to the eventual adoption of UNSCR 1559. Aoun expressed confidence that the criminal charges against him launched by the Lebanese government after his 2003 Congressional testimony would soon be dismissed, along with trumped up court cases dating back to the 1990's which he said falsely accused him of financial misdeeds and defamation of the State. Aoun commented that the latter investigations had turned up nothing, but essentially confiscated his savings, pension and other financial holdings. (Comment: The meeting took place in a spacious, but relatively sparsely furnished apartment in Paris' 17th arrondissement, which did not appear to be a residence. End comment.) Aoun opined that the Lebanese government, in the face of continued pressure, appeared to be ceding in its accusations against him and would likely withdraw the court cases soon, which would permit his return to Lebanon. (Comment: Aoun did not offer a specific time frame for his return, though in a recent French press interview he suggested that he could return to Lebanon by late April, provided that the Syrians had fully withdrawn by then. End comment.)

DISTINCTIONS WITHIN THE OPPOSITION, I WAS FIRST

3. (C) Asked whether he planned to assume a political role in the opposition after returning to Lebanon, Aoun responded with a confident yes. He clarified, though, that, in his view, there was no "one opposition" but rather two; the first group, which he called "my opposition," had taken on a resistance role and refused cooperation with the Syrian government since 1990. The second group, which he termed the "parliamentary opposition," had accepted working with the Syrian government and behaved more like the political opposition in ordinary democratic countries, a category in which occupied Lebanon was not a member. The assassination of Hariri, in Aoun's view, had caused the second group to move over to his camp of resisting Syrian domination. Aoun stressed that for years, he had been alone in his calls for Syrian withdrawal and was told by the other opposition leaders that he was setting the bar too high in demanding an end to the Syrian presence. He claimed to have faced similar

reprobation from the "parliamentary opposition" for his efforts to seek greater USG involvement and contacts with U.S. legislators, including those of Jewish background; he asserted that Lebanese politicians, at Syrian instigation, parroted anti-Israeli rhetoric more harshly than any other Arab governments. Adding to the list of distinctions between him and other opposition figures, Aoun said he was the only opposition leader to support UNSCR 1559 openly, while others had been afraid to do so. Despite the opposition's newfound confidence, Aoun described it as not fully liberated and still hesitant, still exhibiting a hostage mentality after 30 years of Syrian occupation.

14. (C) Commenting on specific opposition factions, Aoun described the Sunnis as remaining "decapitated" for now, in the wake of Hariri's demise. Aoun cited Mohammed Safadi of Tripoli and Fouad Mahkzoumi as potential leaders of the Sunni community; he noted that he was in regular contact with Mahkzoumi. Aoun said he was unsure whether Hariri's sister, Bahia, had staying power as leader of the Sunnis though she had been temporarily propelled into her current high-profile role by her brother's demise. Aoun commented that Druze leader Jumblatt remained the symbolic leader of the opposition though he represented the Druze only. Aoun coyly declined to offer any comments on the political leadership of Lebanon's Christian opposition.

DISARMING HIZBALLAH

15. (C) Though Aoun expressed full support for UNSCR 1559 implementation, he was cautious on the resolution's call for disarmament and dismantling of militias, including Hizballah. He opined that integrating Hizballah into Lebanon's political society would be problematic and take time, and that Hizballah's senior leadership might need "guarantees" in order to lay down its arms. He added that it would be helpful to know "U.S. limits" on the degree to which Aoun might be able to engage with Hizballah's top leadership and assure them that they were not being sought by U.S. courts. Aoun, who claimed to have high-level contacts with Hizballah, opined that it might be "comforting" for the organization's leadership to know that it was not being sought by U.S. courts, which could help negotiations to lead to Hizballah's disarmament and integration into the political scene. Resolving this concern, according to Aoun, was a key priority for Hizballah's top leadership. DCM reiterated that U.S. policy on Hizballah's status as a terrorist organization remained unchanged, and that we continued to call for unconditional implementation of UNSCR 1559. Aoun toughened his language on Hizballah a bit, remarking that there was no justification for Hizballah's remaining armed in the wake of the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon, since both the Israeli threat and Sheb'a farms issue were nothing more than pretexts used by Hizballah. He added that he was seeking to gradually deflate Hizballah's "sacred" image among the Lebanese and Arab public as the victorious resistance to Israel, and show that there was no continued justification for militias independent of the central government. Aoun concluded that Hizballah was increasingly isolated, and had to lower its maximalist demands in the wake of the March 14 opposition demonstration, and that Hizballah Chief Nasrallah appeared ready to make deals.

16. (C) Aoun added that Syrian and Iranian influence on Hizballah remained an important external factor which would contribute to a harder Hizballah line, particularly given the Syrians' ties to Nasrallah. He opined, however, that the fall of the Asad regime in Syria, with the likely arrival of a Sunni government, would change everything, including by ceasing Syria's support for Hizballah. Asked whether he thought a fall of the Syrian regime was likely in the wake of a full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Aoun responded that such an outcome was a certainty, not a mere possibility.

AOUN'S PLAN

17. (C) Outlining his party's priorities for Lebanon, Aoun stressed that reasserting Lebanese control over the nation's security was imperative, through reorganization of the domestic security services, which existed and operated as a clone of the Syrian system, operating via terror and threats. Lebanon's political institutions similarly would have to be revived and change fundamentally in character to take on their intended functions. He described the current parliament as practically Syrian-appointed given the degree of SARG domination. He dismissed the Lebanese judiciary as totally corrupt and transformed into the instrument of the executive to pressure opposition through "mafia laws" and selective justice. Lebanon's economy also needed major restructuring to battle corruption, eliminate the political and economic "neo-feudalism" practiced by Lebanon's oligarchs, and overcome the nation's overwhelming debt burden.

18. (C) On Lebanon's spring parliamentary elections, Aoun said he would be willing to accept a slight delay of a few months, to about August, in the wake of continued delays over formation of a government. He opined that if elections were held on time, Hizballah would "win all the seats." He speculated that a government composed of "familiar old figures" might soon emerge. Delaying elections by a few months, in Aoun's view, would give Lebanon the chance to emerge from the current emotionally charged atmosphere, and give time to convince the public that Hizballah's continued maintenance of a separate militia was unwarranted. Aoun stressed that Lebanon's democratization process would take time, and require the development of institutions reduced to irrelevancy by Syria. He opined that the real battle of Lebanon's political future would therefore be elections in 2009. Aoun added that his party was the only one in Lebanon to offer a secular alternative for the Lebanese people, and that the rise of secular democracy in Lebanon could be an inspiration for the rest of the region.

COMMENTS ON U.S., FRANCE AND OTHERS

19. (C) Aoun described current U.S. efforts on Lebanon as "perfect." He cautioned, at the same time, that the U.S. should be careful to make sure that it was clear in its Lebanon policy and not play a double-game. The U.S., he advised, should remain similarly vigilant regarding those in Lebanon who say privately that they want to be close to the U.S. while participating in anti-U.S. demonstrations. Aoun was less generous in his comments on French President Chirac, whom he said had been angered by criticism Aoun made of Chirac's 1996 visit to Lebanon, during which the French president asserted that implementation of the Ta'if accords could not precede a full and comprehensive Middle East peace. Aoun said that after the 1996 flap, over remarks Aoun made to the press, French authorities essentially banned him from giving interviews and practically put him under a gag order. The situation, of course, had evolved considerably by today, with Aoun now free to talk to the press, such as a February 2005 LBC interview, which he claimed had attracted a TV audience of two million in Lebanon -- perhaps not all supporters. Aoun added that he had no contact with the French government, though he enjoyed support among some French parliamentarians, who had shown greater activism in supporting his anti-Syrian occupation message since 2000. On other Arab governments, Aoun described Jordan as the most forthright in supporting Lebanon's independence, which he attributed to ties to Lebanon among former AUB graduates in the top levels of Jordan's government. Aoun added that Egypt had helped pressure Syria to withdraw, though he quipped that the GOE remained wary that the images of a million Lebanese opposition protesters would inspire popular demands for political freedom in Cairo.

10. (C) Comment: Aoun was relaxed, confident, and somewhat soft-spoken throughout the meeting, which offered few surprises. He appeared gratified that the meeting took place, and more eager to pontificate before a captive U.S. audience than convey a specific message or request to the USG, beyond his probing about the legal status of Hizballah leadership figures. While Aoun was detailed in recounting his status as the first to call for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, he did not offer details on current efforts to support Lebanon's opposition or describe the extent of his base of support in Lebanon. Aoun seemed more intent in pointing out his credentials as an opposition leader and the distinctions between himself and other opposition figures rather than focusing on what unites them. End comment.
LEACH